

Joseph P. Nolan - FEB 23, 2016

KEEPING VETERANS DAY AS A SCHOOL HOLIDAY IN CONNECTICUT

Not long ago, I was told by a Vermont high school principal that most of the traditional school holidays have long been done away with in Vermont except the major holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. That trend is happening in Connecticut, now, particularly with the loss of the November 11th, Veterans Day school holiday. Many school systems in Connecticut have opted to have school on Veterans Day including many in the more affluent towns such as Avon, Canton, West Hartford, Darien, Madison, Glastonbury, Middlebury/Southbury and more recently, Norwalk.

My second son, Joe [Sgt. Joseph M. Nolan, U.S. Army], fluent in the Arabic language, having served almost five years in the Army including a year in Iraq, was mortally wounded near Fallujah, Iraq during the second battle of Fallujah on November 18, 2004 while returning from a motorized patrol. He died about six hours later after being flown to an Army hospital in Baghdad. My other son, Matthew and my daughter, Martha and I were in Rome when Joe died. We did not leave an itinerary of the trip with anybody in the U.S. As a result, we did not learn of my son's death until we came back to the U.S. seven days later. Having lost my wife unexpectedly to cancer in 1992, the loss of Joe was especially difficult. The sense of loss and grieve were coupled with a sense of anger. As a Vietnam veteran, I was well aware of the horror of war, but losing my son was and still is most difficult to deal with. Joe had a brilliant future ahead of him. Both the F.B.I. and the Army had contacted Joe about future employment possibilities with his fluency in the Arabic language.

On an unusually frigid November afternoon, a squad of Waterbury motorcycle police escorted our funeral car and hearse to Bradley Airport. We waited on the tarmac for what seemed like an eternity. A civilian airliner landed. After the passengers unloaded, cargo was off loaded through another door on a conveyor belt. The first item was a metal box draped in an American flag. In the box were the disfigured remains of my son, Joe.

Since the loss of Joe, our goal has been to keep Joe's memory alive. Seven years ago, Joe's high school friends began a memorial golf tournament at the Southington Country Club held in Joe's memory. Monies are donated to three different scholarship funds in Joe's honor in Waterbury, Wolcott, and St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. This year the tournament will be held on Saturday, October 8, 2011 at 12 Noon. [Contact number is: 203 596-2838].

The Connecticut Gold Star Family license plate project was another large initiative. Since the program was approved by the legislature and signed by Governor Rell in 2007, over 200 Connecticut families have been issued Connecticut Gold Star Family license plates as a way to honor their own fallen heroes. Connecticut was the seventh state to approve a fallen soldiers Gold Star family license plate. Only recently have all fifty states enacted laws approving license plates for the families of the fallen.

The CT legislature recently approved a new Vietnam Veterans Day to be held at the end of March. As a Vietnam veteran, the gesture is well intentioned, however, it is a paper holiday.

Veterans Day is fast becoming a paper holiday, as well. Historically, Veterans Day goes back to the cease fire at the end of World War I – on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. There are many myths surrounding Veterans Day. Some people have always felt that Veterans Day is an un-necessary day off. Some feel it was created to honor living veterans. That is not true. Veterans Day is to honor all veterans, living and deceased. The school superintendent in Norwalk has said there will be no more Veterans Day in her system because the students need more instructional time. Middlebury/Southbury school officials have said no more Veterans Day because room is needed in the school holiday calendar in November for two Jewish holy days. Two years ago at the high school in Madison there was school on Veterans Day and there was a ceremony honoring veterans but most students were not allowed to attend the ceremony. The ceremony was videotaped and shown to the students about a week later in homeroom. So much for Veterans Day in Madison.

On the other hand, the Wolcott school system has veterans come to each classroom in the middle school to speak for one hour about what being a veteran means to them and a little about their experiences. This occurs the day before Veterans Day. School is not in session on Veterans Day in Wolcott, itself, out of respect for all veterans living and the fallen. I spoke at this event two years ago. My son, Joe, was a student at the same school many years ago.

Early in the Vietnam War, many young men with college degrees were able to escape the draft by becoming school teachers. Whether they had teacher certifications or not, made no difference, as long as they had four year degrees. Many in that generation later became administrators. Today, in Connecticut, there are a large group of both board members and school administrators who have never been in the military or served in combat. For many of them, Veterans Day is meaningless.

I met an elderly Gold Star mother in Waterbury who lost her son in Vietnam in 1968. She had just received her CT Gold Star Family license plate. She said to me that this was the first time in over forty years that anything had been done to remember her son.

My son, Joe, and many, many others ARE the fallen. We need to keep their memories alive! That is why we have Veterans Day. That same Veterans Day is greatly diminished when the day becomes just another school day. Keep Veterans Day a school holiday in Connecticut to honor all who served in the military. LEST WE FORGET!

Joseph P. Nolan

Gold Star Father

Vietnam Veteran

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